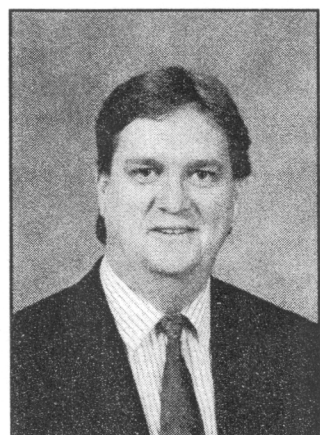


Participation should be a national goal

By Jim Carroll



Jim Carroll is the co-author of the national best-seller, the *Canadian Internet Handbook*, just released in its 1998 edition, and author of *Surviving the Information Age*. He can be reached on the Internet at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com, and has an online site containing many other articles concerning the Internet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.jimcarroll.com/>. He welcomes your comments. Having attended St. George's School in Byron in the mid-'60s, he would love to hear from any of his old classmates.

Almost five years ago, before the Internet exploded into public consciousness, I joined the board of a group of people who were setting up the Toronto FreeNet. The concept of the freenet was something that appealed to me — we should not allow ourselves to become a society in which access to the Internet was restricted only to those who could pay. The business model was simple — funding for the freenet would be solicited from the corporate and government world, by appealing to their social conscience and civic duty.

Even though I am probably a bit to the right on the political spectrum, the concept of a community network providing ubiquitous access to everyone seemed to be an important one.

There was similar sentiment all across the country, and the freenet concept quickly took hold. By 1995, our annual *Canadian Internet Handbook* showed quite a few freenets scattered across the country. The initiative seemed to be well under way.

How much has happened in five years? Today, I would not be the only one to agree that the concept of the community freenet has been less than successful. In my own case, I resigned from the Toronto board within a year, after finding that there were too many competing visions at work. Similar disillusionment occurred elsewhere. And funding was often marginal at best — aside from support from various levels of government, and from telecommunication and high-tech companies, corporate Canada simply did not kick in.

From what I can tell today, the only real surviving freenets are found in Halifax, Ottawa and Victoria, most of which are flying by the seat of their pants. Others, including Toronto, are also hanging on, but are not anywhere close to achieving the original vision. A discussion with a board member of Telecommunities Canada, an umbrella organization of Canadian freenets,

confirmed my opinion.

Then there are community networks, many of which were set up by funding under the Community Access Program from Industry Canada. Announced with great fanfare some years back, community nets arose from a desire of the federal government to ensure that small communities could plug into the Internet. Monies were made available by which Internet services could be brought to small towns nationwide — with the result that many communities quickly became involved.

Today, there are indications that many such initiatives are struggling now that the money has run out.

Both of these situations bother me. We truly do run the risk of seeing a Canadian society involving two marked contrasts. The high-tech, plugged-in Internet class, able to discover and take advantage of the riches of the information age, and able to

land the good jobs. And the unplugged class, forever doomed to a marginal role in a future economy increasingly depending upon computer technology and telecommunication networks.

This is not a trivial issue, as jobs go begging. It seems that each and every day, I open the

newspaper to read some alarmist headline about the "skills shortage" in Canada. Corporations seem to regularly decry the fact there are not enough high-tech workers available to meet demand.

After reading such a headline, I turn around and take a look at the extent of support of the corporate world for the freenet and community network concept. I see precious little involvement by the same corporate sector.

Bottom line? I find the corporate world to be alarmingly hypocritical when it comes to its role in supporting what should be a national goal — that of ensuring that all Canadians, regardless of their income, can be full participants in the information age. 

We run the risk of having a plugged-in, high-tech class and an unplugged class doomed to a marginal role
